

Title: Maze of Light

Summary: This is a short story taking place in the middle of my novel-length story Comes Out of Darkness Morn, but chronicling an event that's only referred to glancingly there. It probably won't make much sense if you haven't read CooDM and its prequels. James Potter faces an ancient artifact that will either grant him peace from his mistakes, or end them forever.

Warnings: This is mostly gen, though James/Lily is referred to, but I suppose it requires a warning for emotional upset.

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Maze of Light

James Potter halted outside the main hall of Lux Aeterna, and once again checked the small bag slung over his shoulder. Yes, he had the mirror, and the small silver knife, and the vial of poison in case something went very badly wrong and he had no other way to escape the Maze. He had confirmed that he had them in the old room he'd taken his for his own quarters, and again on the stairs, and again now.

Stop stalling and get on with it, James.

He bowed his head and shivered, even though the voice was nothing more than the voice of his own thoughts. He'd become quite familiar with it over the course of the last few months, as he stayed in the Potter family linchpin, named for eternal Light, and tried to come to grips with what he had done and what he had allowed to happen in the past. He'd refused all letters from Dumbledore, read many others but not replied, and sent only one of his own, to Remus. Remus was the only one who might understand the storm that James found in his own thoughts whenever he glanced at them.

I know I bloody well don't, James thought, and then grimaced as he felt the artifact in the main hall give out a sharp pulse of magic, like sunlight on his face, even though the door between him and it was closed. The Maze was awake, then, and sensed him. Now the Light

magic was waiting to see if he would come through, or turn his back and refuse it.

He couldn't. He had refused enough in his life, and it had backed him into this corner. He didn't want to hurt anyone else, but no matter what he did—stayed here, or returned and confronted Lily and his boys and his friends and Dumbledore—he would. The Maze offered death, perhaps, but also a path out of this confusion.

He had no other choice, and for once, instead of closing his eyes and huddling against the ground like a hare who'd just seen a threat in the hopes that it would miss him, he was going to face it.

He took another deep breath, on the off chance that it might help, and pushed open the door.

A flood of light greeted him, for all that it was night outside Lux Aeterna. The Maze had supposedly come from some other world where it was always day, part of the reason that it was able to continually shine. James blinked and shielded his eyes as he paced slowly forward, confirming his childhood impressions of the Maze as he moved.

Yes, it still looked the same: silvery folds of walls and tunnels that nearly filled the room, blending and rushing into each other like water or foam, but undeniably sharp. The edges glittered like diamond. Light radiated from them, and from the heart of the Maze, which James couldn't see. Trying to see it only resulted in afterimages. It was too much a mixture of silver and gold and white and the sun shining off polished glass. James blinked and looked away, and then took the mirror from his bag and held it up in front of him.

He felt the heat glow through the mirror's polished silver and into the wooden frame, and then into his hands, as the Maze recognized his intention to enter it. The light abruptly dimmed, and then surged again. His request was granted.

James sighed. Another excuse to hide taken away, he thought, as he laid the mirror down on the floor and then removed the knife from the

bag. A quick cut to the side of his right arm, and he dripped three drops of blood on the floor.

His grandparents had declared themselves Light wizards and abandoned many of the old pureblood dances that favored the strong and bred people more likely to break than bend, but some of the ancient rituals were still essential for things like this, James's father had taught him. The Maze had once belonged only to itself, but it had resided in Lux Aeterna for generations now. It needed to know that the one facing it was really a Potter before he had a chance of surviving. There had been a nasty surprise a few generations back when it turned out James's several-times-great aunt was not, in fact, a Potter, and she had tried to enter the Maze anyway.

There was no problem here, of course. Some of the protective glow diminished, and James could move nearer for the first time. He sealed the wound with a swipe of his wand and let the knife drop behind him. He realized that he was breathing lightly, so lightly he could hardly hear it himself, and that his chest felt tight and too warm.

Another barrier passed.

And now there was only the Maze, and the tunnel in front of him, like a tunnel into the ocean, complete with a white edge that reached out and swept up to his feet like foam.

James shivered.

Light and Dark magic were divided by several differences, but only one mattered to the Maze. Dark wizards often relied on deception and subterfuge; almost every glamour had come from the wands of experimenting Dark wizards. Light relied on truth. The Maze would show him the results of his mistakes, force him to face, in brutal honesty, every rationalization he had made about them, and test his acceptance of them in the meantime. If he was unable to accept that he had made these mistakes and needed to change, the Maze would kill him, or perhaps trap him in limbo. Hence the vial of poison.

Once he entered the Maze, he was honest, or he was dead.

James closed his eyes, and remembered the expression on Lily's face the night he had left Godric's Hollow, the sudden devastating realization that had followed his first realization of the night—that a pureblood justice ritual had heard Harry's plea to take her magic, and listened to it, and obeyed him. She had deserved to lose her magic, according to the ritual's impartial judgment.

And he had been part of the reason that that had happened.

He had no choice, not if he loved his family.

James moved forward, and entered the Maze.
James bowed his head and shut his eyes.

He had faced the minor mistakes of his childhood, and accepted them easily enough. For the most part, he had made peace with them long since. It had been a mistake, in many ways, to train to become an Animagus when he learned of Remus's lycanthropy, and to teach Sirius when he asked, and to tease and cajole Peter until he went along with it. There were the mistakes that had caused his parents pain before he came to Hogwarts. There were the common pranks in Hogwarts, the times he had cheated on exams, the times when he had earned, and deserved, detention for his cruel remarks about the Defense professor's deformities. For the most part, they were old regrets, and James could put them aside.

Not so easily this one. The scene waited for him on the Maze's wall, with infinite patience. It would go on waiting until the Maze decided that he would never accept it, and then he would have death one way or the other.

James raised his head and opened his eyes.

In the mirror, he watched himself bite his lip and shift anxiously back and forth on his bed in the sixth-year Gryffindor boys' room. Sirius was lying on his own, his gray eyes brilliant. Sirius had been happier than James had ever seen him that year, in the months after he finally fled his family and came to live with James instead. But the

happiness often translated itself into glass-edged recklessness, deadly as the Maze's edges in its own way, and this was a time it had.

"Come on, James," Sirius coaxed. "It'll be fun." He paused—for effect, James realized, viewing this scene from the outside. "I don't usually have to explain to you how much fun something is," he said, a whinge creeping into his voice. "Peter, sure. And you know how Remus needs to be prodded along. Come on. What's eating you?"

The adolescent James lay back and folded his arms behind his head. "I don't know, really," he said slowly. "After all, it's just a more intense version of what we've always done."

The adult James flinched as the Maze made sure the words echoed in his ears. There's my first rationalization. And Merlin, of course it matters. We're talking about someone else's life here, not his pride, and I've known since I was a child which one matters more.

"But I just don't think it's right." James bit his lip again.

Sirius snorted. "Come on, James. It's Snivellus. He deserves a good scare, especially after what he did to Peter the other day."

The Maze stilled the scene, and James sighed. "I know," he whispered. "Sirius was only using that to butter me up. I know he didn't care all that much about what had happened to Peter." One thing the Maze was making sure he understood was how much Peter had seemed like a tag-along to his friends, more tolerated than welcomed. Of course, his fawning attitude played into that, but if James and Sirius were really as much moral paragons as he had thought they were in Hogwarts, they should have been able to forgive him through their superior understanding of human nature.

But the James on the wall nodded, and then said, "I can see that, I guess. When? Which night Remus transforms?"

The scene blurred into fog, which coalesced into the younger James hurtling across the grass towards the Whomping Willow. He threw a rock that hit the knot precisely, hurried under the suddenly still branches, and ducked into the tunnel at its base, then thrashed

through the darkness until he reached the door into the Shrieking Shack. He could hear Sirius barking joyfully, and the snarls of the beast Remus had become, and Snape's terrified screams.

James threw the door open. He cast a Stunning Spell at the werewolf. Werewolves were usually better-equipped to resist them, but Remus had let his friends in on a secret: just after his transformation, he was still woozy, and could be taken down by a number of spells that otherwise wouldn't work on him. Now, he staggered and fell.

James also Stunned Sirius, who was in his dog form, just to make sure he wouldn't interfere, and then grabbed Snape and pulled him out of the Shack. Snape said nothing at all until they were almost out of the tunnel.

"Why, Potter?" he whispered.

"I couldn't let them kill you," said James, and then stopped. That sounded stupid even to himself, and he didn't say the words that burned on his tongue, because they were even more stupid. Lives are worth more than that. We've hurt each other, but it was just stupid school-boy stuff. This was worse.

The adult James bowed his head. He should have said them. Things might have been different if he had.

Snape, though, sneered and wrenched himself away from James. "You knew about it," he said. "You knew about it, and you decided to come and stop them from killing me at the last minute."

"Yes," said James. And then, because he could, and Snape's sneer irritated him, "And now you owe me a life debt, Snivellus, which you'd better not forget."

Snape threw him a glare full of poison, and then turned and stalked out of the tree. The adolescent James stepped free of the Willow, waited until he was sure Snape was gone, and changed into his stag form. Remus and Sirius would be coming out soon, and it would be better if he didn't look like the human who had Stunned the werewolf.

James let out a shaky breath and scrubbed a hand over his eyes. I have no one to blame but myself for that part. I could have stopped Sirius when he was setting the prank in motion. I could have made up my mind to interfere earlier, so that Snape didn't almost die. I could have told Dumbledore if Sirius wouldn't stop, and he would have prevented the whole thing from happening. And then maybe Snape wouldn't hate me so much, and if he did end up becoming as important to Harry's life as he has, then he might not fight me as bitterly as I think he will if I try to take Harry back. And I wouldn't have wronged Remus as bitterly as I did, almost making him into the murderous beast that he worked so hard to avoid becoming.

But he hadn't said the words he should have. He was too much afraid of looking stupid, when a true Gryffindor would have risked it.

The Maze let him go abruptly, and James moved on up the tunnel, shivering. He thought he knew when the next profound mistake would appear, and he was looking forward to facing that one even less.

"No!"

The Maze echoed with his shout, and it waited. James could feel the profound magic at the center of it, watching him without pity. The Maze was interested in justice and redemption, not mercy. If he refused now, then it would kill him, and give him no second chances.

I have to live, James thought. I have to see this.

Shaking, he opened his eyes.

He saw himself standing in front of a fire, turned towards it. Behind him, in one of the chairs of the comfortable sitting room at Godric's Hollow, waited Dumbledore. He had been silent for some time, but now he spoke, his voice the gentle, implacable one of the Light's fabled leader, the one who coaxed even his political enemies into agreeing reluctantly that this was the best, the only, course of action.

"James."

The younger James in the image straightened his shoulders and turned around slowly.

"It is the only way," Dumbledore said quietly. "You know that the prophecy must come true. Voldemort cannot be defeated otherwise." The younger James winced at the Dark Lord's name, but nodded. "And if he strikes at someone else, we may never know who that person is. We certainly will not be able to keep him safe and protect him as we should do, nor the person who, according to the prophecy, will be his shield and the one who loves him.

"If Voldemort strikes at your boys, then I believe the prophecy will come true through them. I have thought this ever since Lily had twins at the end of July. You know the prophecy speaks clearly of a younger and an elder. The younger boy would be Connor, destined to defeat Voldemort, and the elder Harry. But, to defeat Voldemort, Connor must be marked, according to the terms of the prophecy. The Fidelius must be released. Voldemort must be encouraged to attack your sons, and not the Longbottoms or anyone else who might conceivably fit the prophecy. He knows only a few lines of it, not the whole thing, and this way we can deceive him.

"And you know that you and Lily would be able to make this sacrifice. You are both Gryffindors, brave and strong and devoted to the Light. You have both escaped Voldemort three times. You are the perfect candidates."

James in the image closed his eyes and swallowed. James, as himself, did the same things. The logic sounded horribly convincing, even now. What were his sons' lives against the fate of the world? Against the chance to attack Voldemort?

But now he knew, he knew, what that bargain had cost Harry and Connor both. And it was about to cost another person nearly as much.

James opened his eyes and watched.

"But does Peter really have to go to Azkaban?" his self in the image whispered. "Couldn't we just lure Voldemort here and then explain what we did?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his face kind but stern. “We cannot, James. It is necessary that the Ministry and the rest of our world trust absolutely in the Light, and many people would see us as bating a trap with innocent children—“

Which is what we did, James thought.

“—if we told them what was happening. Instead, we must make it seem a simple betrayal, and then tuck the traitor away where no one can question him. And you know that only Peter has the strength to go willingly to Azkaban. Sirius’s mind would tear apart. Voldemort has already almost torn it apart, making him suffer as he tortured Regulus. Remus needs his friends too much. You need your family too much. Peter is already apparently a Death Eater, and Voldemort believes him jealous of you, to such an extent that he would betray his friends to their worst enemy. Make Peter your Secret-Keeper, and you free both Sirius and Regulus of their pain as well as insure the future of our world.”

“Very well,” the James in the image whispered.

James remembered himself as having hesitated longer before agreeing. It was somewhat humiliating to discover that he had not.

But it seared him more to be forced to remember, as he had forced himself not to remember for years, that he had willingly given up Peter, sent him to Azkaban and twelve years of insanity, and lied to his sons, telling both Harry and Connor that Peter had simply been evil, and jealous of his more talented friends. And then, when Peter had broken free this summer, James had believed, in terror, that Peter had come to take revenge on them for having sent him into living death.

Peter had not hurt Harry, despite having access to him several times.

I never thought he was good enough to be in Gryffindor. Instead, he’s apparently strong enough not to blame us, or at least not to blame my sons for my mistake.

Why had he despised Peter so much, anyway? Because he was small and fat and not very clever?

A stupid bunch of reasons to send someone to prison for twelve years.

James sucked in a deep breath. "I agree," he whispered. "I will write to Peter, if I get out of here alive, and tell him I'm sorry."

The Maze eased its hold on him. The younger James and Dumbledore wavered and dissolved into mist. James moved forward, or perhaps backward; the tunnels had a habit of shifting, and with his eyes blinded by tears of guilt and shame, it was not always easy to tell where he was, or where he had been.

James wiped his mouth carefully. He'd vomited several times, and now his head and his stomach both felt extraordinarily light. He didn't have to eat while he was in the Maze—the magic would keep him alive until he chose to either refuse the Maze's revelations or take the poison—but he felt emptier anyway, now that he had expelled most of the food he'd come in here with.

He knelt there, and did not know if he could lift his head.

The images were waiting, there.

With a breath that he hoped would replace the lost food with courage, James faced them again.

The Maze showed memories without a pause, without a break. It showed him his sons growing up. Connor was mostly the way that James had remembered him, sweet and innocent, his hazel eyes flashing like his father's when he played a prank, his fringe occasionally bouncing up to reveal the heart-shaped scar Voldemort's wand had left him with. Dumbledore's plan had worked. Voldemort had come to Godric's Hollow, shot the Killing Curse at the baby destined to defeat him, and been destroyed. Connor was growing up with his parents, sheltered, locked tight behind isolation wards to prevent any former Death Eaters from attacking him in their dead master's name. Oh, he was lied to, in that James and Lily had never

told him the truth about the prophecy or Peter or how he was left open to attack on the night Peter broke the Fidelius Charm on Dumbledore's orders, but he was a relatively normal child.

It was Harry who was entirely different from his memories—and this time, the Maze would not allow James to hide his head in the sand, or turn his back on the obvious signs that he had forced himself to miss. James in the images thought he had a perfect family. The Maze made sure his older self knew he did not.

From the moment of the attack that both babies had survived, Connor with his heart-shaped scar, Harry with the vivid lightning bolt on his forehead and his magic inexplicably heightened after the confrontation with Voldemort, Lily had trained Harry to shelter, guard, and protect Connor, to be the shield standing between his brother and danger. She had trained him in complex spells that no child of five should have been able to master. She told him the tales of the First War, stories of torture and rape and murder that no child should hear. She insisted that he read histories of the wizarding world, to learn complex pureblood rituals and dances that might be essential in winning Connor allies someday, and practice the formalities until he could recite them in his sleep.

My grandparents tried so hard to get the Potters away from that, to stop us from being ice-cold machines who would use the Killing Curse without a thought, James said to himself, not for the first time, as he watched Harry go under the web at four that bound part of his magic away, because he was so powerful that Lily was afraid he might harm Connor. I was supposed to raise my children in peace and freedom. And what happened? I allowed one of them to become pureblood at the deeper levels, just because Lily thought it was necessary.

He'd had time to notice. Lily could never have hidden this from him so completely unless she had his willing cooperation. And James saw himself give it. He convinced himself that Harry was just studious, that the way he devoured books just meant he'd end up in Ravenclaw when he went to Hogwarts. He walked in on Harry practicing wandless magic, and told himself firmly that he must have been mistaken. He listened to Harry discuss, in cold detail, the deaths

caused by Voldemort's Black Plague spell, and he scolded Sirius for scaring his son with horrible stories. He turned away from every opportunity to realize that he didn't live in a normal house with a normal wife and two normal children, but one normal child, a wife so dedicated to the war effort that she had made one of their sons a sacrifice, and one young man who hadn't been a child since he began reciting the vows to defend Connor, save him, and hide his talents, always, so that observers would think the miraculous rescues and spells had come from Connor himself. He saw, for the first time, how Harry's love for his brother was not natural, but obsessive and cultivated, growing around him like a vine, twisting him into a soldier before he was six.

He'd allowed that to happen. He should have been a better guardian, a better father.

The Maze bound him with chains of shame and self-loathing, and held him there as he vomited again over lost chances.

He watched through hazy eyes as Harry and Connor went to Hogwarts. Connor went to Gryffindor. Harry, instead of going to Gryffindor as he should have, went to Slytherin—in large part thanks to Lily's intense training and the cunning he'd exercised in hiding that training from anyone else. James saw himself ask the Headmaster, several times, if Harry could be Re-Sorted, and Dumbledore regretfully refuse.

I should have either supported Harry wholeheartedly, or pushed wholeheartedly to get him into another House, James thought, shuddering. Not this—this half-effort, this believing the worst of Harry and then giving in the moment Albus told me I shouldn't push. What kind of a father am I?

A bad one, the Maze answered him, and dragged him on ruthlessly through Harry's second year, when Harry had first broken his arm in a Quidditch game and then had to remain at the school over Christmas, thanks to the havoc that Tom Riddle, Voldemort's younger self, had managed to wreak on his mind when he possessed Harry. Neither time had James visited Harry in the hospital wing. Lily had been deep in the middle of persuading him that Harry really was better off as a

sacrifice, and that his seeing Harry at the moment would just encourage a love neither of them could afford, that the world could not afford. They had to let Harry be the sacrifice the prophecy said he had to be. James had slowly come to agree with her. He'd let her make him agree with things he never should have.

Then Harry had come home for Easter holidays, and Remus, convinced something was wrong and unrelenting in the face of Lily's reassurances that nothing was, had tried to kidnap Harry and take him somewhere safe.

James watched, sick, from the outside, as he pulled a silver knife on one of his best friends, and forced Remus into going to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, of course, had Obliviated Remus, unable to take the chance that he would disrupt the prophecy by trying to make Harry do something other than live for his brother.

That's two apologies I owe Remus, then. James swallowed thickly. Or three.

On the year turned, only this time James saw what had really happened. Harry had cast the Fugitivus Animus spell on him and Lily, which made them forget for months that they even had a second son. Harry had done it because of the mental upset caused by his battle with Tom Riddle at the end of the year; if his parents had paid any negative attention to him at all, he might have killed them. It was safer to make them forget he existed, and to try to survive without their care.

It was no wonder, James thought, numbly, from the middle of his shock, that Harry had turned to Snape for guardianship and his best friend, Draco Malfoy, for other kinds of understanding. They were the only ones other than Dumbledore who knew what had happened to Harry, and certainly the only ones who might have been able to help him heal. James and Lily quite happily existed in the fantasy that they had only one son, while Harry struggled to get his shredded thoughts and his vicious magic back under control.

Then came Christmas, when Harry returned home to his family and removed the Fugitivus Animus from Lily, because he wanted his

mother back—and, in doing that, removed it from James as well, though he hadn't known that at the time.

James put his hands over his eyes as he watched the confrontation between Harry and Lily, but their voices still echoed in his ears. Lily pretended to be sorry. Harry made plans for them to face the future together, as a family.

Then Lily tried to bind Harry's magic again.

Harry called the ancient justice ritual and stripped the magic from Lily, making her a Muggle, and vanished, along with a phoenix.

And James left for Lux Aeterna, once again too much of a coward to confront Lily, or go after Harry, who had fled to the Malfoys', or do anything but retreat and hide. He'd justified it as needing time to think.

He saw it for what it really was now.

You were hiding from your responsibilities again, James. You should have been a better husband. You should have been a better father. You should have stood up, at some point, and told Lily that what she was doing was wrong. Instead, you have one son who's never learned the truth, and one son who's nearly died and teetered on the brink of insanity multiple times, and a wife deprived of magic by an impartial ritual.

Good show, James.

Guilt perched on his shoulders and scraped them to the bone, but the Maze was not satisfied with that. It would not allow him to wallow.

And why not? James thought furiously, wiping at the tears on his cheeks. Wallowing is better than vomiting. I like wallowing.

Because it was not enough.

He would only hide in self-pity for the rest of his life if things went on like this. The Maze would not allow him to hide there, any more than

it would let him hide inside itself. He was to be dragged forward into the light of honesty and truth, unless he refused and died.

I have seen what I did that was so awful, mistakes piled on top of mistakes.

Now, what am I going to do about it?

James took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

Start by being a better father.

I'll bring the boys here for the summer, rather than leave them at Hogwarts, or in Lily's sacrificial care. I'll do what I should have done all along, and teach them about their heritage, their family—play my part in their education. I'll love them more, and tell them the truth. My bonds with both of them are so fragile right now. Connor won't trust me for hiding these last few months, and Harry won't trust me for hiding all his life.

I'll get them to trust me. No, more than that—I'll show them I can be trusted.

Lily...

I love her, but there's no way she can be trusted around either of the boys right now. Connor would listen to her too much. Harry doesn't want to see her ever again. I'll wait, and send an owl to her when I can, to ask her to do something other than control them. I don't know how hard it will be to get her to agree to that.

I don't know how hard it will be to do any of this.

For the first time in years, though, James thought that it might not matter how hard this was. He had given up the life that held those memories. He'd kept looking at the images even when they made him sick. He'd already given up the temptation to back out when he stepped into the Maze.

How could he ever have thought that he was unchanged, that he wouldn't change until the final moment passed and the Maze released him?

Just by carrying through with the decision to step into it, he'd done something that would have been incomprehensible to the versions of James in these images.

He threw his head back and laughed.

The laughter had an immediate effect on the Maze. It bulged and rippled, and the silver walls appeared to rise up around him like crashing waves. James looked up, and saw himself reflected from half a dozen curves and corners, then seven, then twelve, then thirteen, then dozens of them.

The Jameses were poised to fall on him, if he chose to continue. There were still consequences of his mistakes that he needed to see. There were still paths that he couldn't take without facing those consequences. There were still non-obvious ripples from his actions that would build into obvious ones in a short time.

James smiled. He thought it very appropriate, after so many years when he'd hidden his own realizations from himself, that he hadn't realized his own decision until just now.

"Yes," he said aloud, so the Maze would recognize it.

Down came the sides, and buried him in honesty, buried him in horrible consequences to his sons, buried him in truth, buried him in Light.

James lifted his head, slightly dazed. He was lying on the floor of Lux Aeterna's great hall. Behind him shimmered the Maze, gone back to its silver, quiescent state, the wards around it that prevented casual entrance burning. James stood slowly, and then shook his head as more images played through it in a storm.

He'd seen Harry break free of the webs that held him prisoner, now and forever, and seen how much that scared Connor. He would have

to work to heal not only the trust between him and his sons, but the bond that Harry and Connor had once shared.

He'd seen Sirius, possessed by Voldemort, trap his sons in the Shrieking Shack. He'd seen Voldemort delay too long, and Sirius break free long enough to kill himself and take that bit of the Dark Lord with him. He'd seen Harry and Connor learn the truth about what had happened at Godric's Hollow the night that James and Lily abandoned them to their fate, and he'd seen Harry kill for the first time. It didn't matter that the kill had been a Death Eater; Harry would still need healing.

He'd been able, briefly, to send a letter to Remus, then, the Maze transporting parchment and quill to him when it had felt his plan and approved of it. He'd wanted to tell Remus that he would go to his sons the moment he was free of the Maze.

And that moment was now. Never mind that it was the middle of the night again, from the feel of the house's wards, and probably a few weeks later than the time when he had seen his sons simultaneously traumatized. Never mind that he had not yet properly mourned Sirius, or come to terms with his death. James was going to Hogwarts. He was going to retrieve his sons.

If they will have me. I know they might not. And that was a fear in him, a sickening fear, slamming against and biting at the inside of his stomach.

But Gryffindors did not run from their fears. Gryffindors faced them, and fought anyway.

James thought it was a truth he had forgotten for far too long.

He made his way smoothly towards the door from the hall, his mind already working. One of the upper rooms had a Floo that corrected directly to Hogwarts's hospital wing, a relic of the days when traveling by the Hogwarts Express had been too dangerous for Potter children. He would contact Madam Pomfrey and ask her if he might come through.

He would speak with his boys. He would speak with Remus. He would bring them all back here, and do what he could to repair the bonds he'd broken, or set new ones in place if the old ones could not be repaired.

And then...

James's hand twitched. He'd faced his mistakes. He could help other people heal, but just remaining in Lux Aeterna and showing his sons their heritage and talking with his friends wasn't enough. His mistakes had rolled down and affected other people, and he wanted to make up for that, if he could.

The Maze had made him face the moment when he'd broken and tortured Bellatrix Lestrange, likely sending her insane before she ever went to Azkaban. He'd given up being an Auror because of that, come back to Godric's Hollow and hidden his head in the sand. It was yet another step in a long dance of being afraid, of giving up when he encountered something that he didn't want to know, of turning away and refusing to acknowledge reality.

James didn't think he could do that anymore.

A war was beginning. He had money, he had people who would listen to him in the Ministry for his name and his deeds in the past, he had Auror training. And he had his courage back, now, or at least the means to stare his fear in the face.

When his boys went back to Hogwarts after this summer, he planned to ask the Ministry if they could find any use for a Potter willing to fight again.

He reached the door, spun, and bowed to the Maze, which glittered behind him.

"Thank you," he said softly.

The Maze glinted, and did not answer, which was enough of one.

James walked through the door, his head high and his heart pounding with terror on the edge of joy. Time to go meet Connor and Harry, and then to go forward and meet the rest of his life.